

THE SYSTEM IS THE PROBLEM*

By George Katsiaficas

Between the first Gulf War in 1991 and the current rejuvenation of American-led attempts to reduce the Iraqi people and their oil to instruments of global capital, the neoliberal war against Iraq has cost well over one million lives, mainly from the effects of the UN approved embargo but also from the residual effects of the hundreds of tons of depleted uranium weapons left behind by the US.¹ Alongside the current war against Iraq and threat of war against North Korea, Bush and Co. are today waging wars in Afghanistan, the Philippines, and Colombia (where they are using extensive chemical spraying that affects hundreds of thousands of innocent farmers and their families); they have armed Israel and permit it to overrun and destroy Palestinian towns and cities; they are encouraging the revival of German and Japanese militarism and are attempting to overthrow the Chavez government in Venezuela; they have clamped a decades-long embargo on Cuba; they have withdrawn from the International Criminal Court, scrapped the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the Kyoto protocols, and refused to sign a new international protocol to the 1972 biological warfare treaty; they seek to develop new genetic weapons,² miniature nuclear “bunker-buster” bombs (in defiance of international treaties to which the US is a signatory) and dramatically increased military spending. Most ominously, Bush and Co. have adopted a new “first-strike” strategic doctrine, replacing decades of US policies based on “deterrence” and “containment.”

When I say Bush and Co., I do not refer only to one man and his administration; it is the *system* that is the problem. Although American media continually celebrate the distance of current US policies of those from Nazi Germany, during World War 2, President George H.W. Bush’s grandfather owned several large corporations that worked for Hitler and the Nazi regime.³

Prescott Bush was managing partner of Brown Brothers Harriman. His 18-year-old son George, the future U.S. President, had just begun training to become a naval pilot. On Oct. 20, 1942, the U.S. government ordered the seizure of Nazi German banking operations in New York City, which were being conducted by Prescott Bush. Under the *Trading with the Enemy Act*, the government took over the *Union Banking Corporation*, in which Bush was a director. The U.S. Alien Property Custodian seized Union Banking Corp.’s stock shares, all of which were owned by Prescott Bush, E. Roland “Bunny” Harriman, three Nazi executives, and two other associates of Bush. Nazi interests in the *Silesian-American Corporation*, long managed by Prescott Bush and his father-in-law George Herbert Walker, were seized under the Trading with the Enemy Act on Nov. 17, 1942. In this action, the government announced that it was seizing only the Nazi interests, leaving the Nazis’ U.S. partners to carry on the business. These and other actions taken by the U.S. government in wartime were, tragically, too little and too late. President Bush’s family had already played a central role in financing and arming Adolf Hitler for his takeover of Germany; in financing and managing the buildup of Nazi war industries for the conquest of Europe and war against the U.S.A.; and in the development of Nazi genocide theories and racial propaganda, with their well-known results. The 1942 U.S. government investigative report said that Bush’s Nazi-front bank was an interlocking concern with the *Vereinigte Stahlwerke* (United Steel Works Corporation or *German Steel Trust*) led by Fritz Thyssen and his two brothers. After the war, Congressional investigators probed the Thyssen interests, Union Banking Corp. and related Nazi units. The investigation showed that the

Vereinigte Stahlwerke

had produced the following approximate proportions of total German national output:

50.8% of Nazi Germany's pig iron

41.4% of Nazi Germany's universal plate

36.0% of Nazi Germany's heavy plate

38.5% of Nazi Germany's galvanized sheet

45.5% of Nazi Germany's pipes and tubes

22.1% of Nazi Germany's wire

Americans celebrate their distance from German and Japanese fascism, but immediately after World War 2, US policymakers made Japan and Germany their new best friends—quickly isolating Russia and, after 1949, China—their former allies in the struggle against fascism. In West Germany and Japan, US administrators quickly embraced former fascist operatives, integrating them into US structures of military and economic control. More recently President Bush I and co-workers like James Baker have been involved with the Bin Laden family in the Carlyle group, a well-connected Washington merchant bank specializing in buyouts of defense and aerospace companies.⁴ Thus wars in which millions of people have been killed and continue to be killed should be seen as little more than members of the super-rich jockeying for world power.

No matter who sits in the White House, whether George Bush or John Kerry or someone else, militarism has long been and will surely remain at the center of US foreign policy and economic development. The U.S. Congress has been little better than Bush: among other things, it rejected the nuclear test ban treaty signed by 164 nations and has fully endorsed Bush's foreign policy on every issue. With Congressional funding, the U.S. now has over 250,000 troops in 141 countries—and it is seeking new bases and attempting to install more troops in places like Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. In Northeast Asia, 100,000 US troops are stationed indefinitely.

Since 1948, the US has spent more than \$15 trillion on the military—more than the cumulative monetary value of all human-made wealth in the U.S.—more than the value of all airports, factories, highways, bridges, buildings, machinery, water and sewage systems, power plants, schools, hospitals, shopping centers, hotels, houses, and automobiles. If we add the current Pentagon budget (over \$346 billion in fiscal 2002) to foreign military aid, veterans' pensions, the military portion of NASA, the nuclear weapons budget of the Energy Department and the interest payments on debt from past military spending, the US spends \$670 billion every year on the military—more than a million dollars a minute.⁵ The US military budget is larger than the world's next 15 biggest spenders combined, accounting for 36% of global military expenditures. Although the main problem is obviously the U.S., nearly two-thirds of global military spending today occurs outside the U.S. Japanese and German militarism are being revived, while in South Korea the military budget was increased by 12.7% for 2003 to more than

\$14 billion.

In a phrase, military madness defines the world today—no matter who sits at the pinnacles of power in national governments. In the following remarks, I hope to clarify the historical character of this disease.

The Historical Pattern of Violence

Beginning in the sixteenth century, peripheral areas were rapidly assimilated into a capitalist world system based in Europe. Before they became organized as nation-states, white European settlers in America committed genocide to steal the land of indigenous peoples. Besides massacring tens of millions of Native Americans, European colonialists enslaved tens of millions of Africans to build up their new empires. Estimates of the number of Africans **killed** in the slave trade range from 15 to 50 million human beings. From their earliest days, Northern European settler-colonists practiced biological warfare. Lord Jeffrey Amherst, after whom towns in Massachusetts, New York and New Hampshire are named to this day, was celebrated because he devised a scheme to rid the land of indigenous people without risking white lives. He gave Native Americans blankets carrying smallpox virus, wiping out entire villages under the guise of providing assistance. In the century after the American Revolution, nearly all native peoples were systematically butchered and the few survivors compelled to live on reservations.

Have people in the US apologized for and renounced such violence? Unfortunately, the answer is no. Indeed, towns are still named for Amherst, and one of the fanciest restaurants near prestigious Amherst College is today called the “Lord Jeff.” In a similar vein, white European settler-colonists purposely wiped out the buffalo, seeking to deprive native peoples of their primary source of food. Between 1872 and 1874, it is estimated that 3,700,000 buffalo were slaughtered (only 150,000 of them by Native Americans). From 1874 to 1883, as settler colonialism in the West intensified, some 8 million buffalo were massacred. Far from feeling guilty for this form of biological warfare, “Buffalo Bill” staged a “Wild West” circus-style show for many years, touring not only the East Coast of the US but also Europe, at times even including the great Lakota/Sioux warrior chief, Sitting Bull.

In the name of freedom, the US annexed nearly half of Mexico and slaughtered as many as a million Filipinos, 600,000 on the island of Luzon alone. Between 1898 and 1934 US Marines invaded Honduras 7 times, Cuba 4 times, Nicaragua 5, the Dominican Republic 4, Haiti and Panama twice each, Guatemala once, Mexico 3 times and Colombia 4 times. In 1915, over 50,000 Haitians were killed when U.S. troops mercilessly put down a peasant rebellion.⁶ Marines were sent to China, Russia, and North Africa—in short, wherever the masters of US imperialism needed them.

The Killing Fields of Asia

Lest we forget history, we must recall that in Asia in the last half century, the US has slaughtered over 8 million people in regional wars so distant from the US mainland that historians refer to this period

as the “Cold” War. In just three years, some five million Koreans perished, the vast majority of them innocent civilians. Although cities were routinely reduced to rubble and ash and the US employed biological weapons,⁷ it still will neither admit to nor apologize for these actions. Instead it moved the killing fields to Indochina, where it used more firepower than had been used in all previous wars in history combined, killing three million more human beings and leaving millions more wounded or refugees. Chemical warfare, euphemistically called Agent Orange, was systematic and deadly: over 20 million gallons of Agent Orange were sprayed on Vietnam.⁸ For every man, woman and child in South Vietnam, the US dropped more than 1000 pounds of bombs (the equivalent of 700 Hiroshima bombs), sprayed a gallon of Agent Orange, and used 40 pounds of napalm and half a ton of CS gas on people whose only wrongdoing was to struggle for national independence.⁹ The kill ratio per capita in these two Asian wars was about 1000 times that of wars in Central America and even higher than for the more than 200 other US military interventions during the “Cold War.”

To understand these atrocities, we must look to history. As previously stated, in 1945 Japan and West Germany were quickly made into new best friends of the US. The wartime occupation planned for Japan was sent instead to Korea, where at least 100,000 patriots (some say as many as one million) in the southern part of the country were massacred prior to the official outbreak of war in June 1950. Under the US military government, a massacre in Jeju began in 1948 that killed upwards of 30,000 people out of a total population of 700,000 (some estimates place the number of people killed closer to 70,000). When the 14th Regiment and other members of the South Korean military force organized and armed by the US mutinied in Yeosu and turned their guns on the US-sponsored regime, Captain James Hausmann, a US officer, personally led and organized the Rhee government’s suppression of the insurrection, carrying out reprisals against the population of Suncheon, Yeosu, Kure and other cities that have yet to be acknowledged. The killing fields were brought to Jiri Mountain, where official US military documents complained that the men were too tired from using bayonets to kill prisoners.

As previously mentioned, former Nazi and Japanese-collaborators were hired by the United States in both West Germany and South Korea to help maintain order. Thus Nazi intelligence service personnel, German rocket scientists, and Japanese experts in biological warfare became employees of the US government. Of all these men (very few were women), the most notorious is Colonel Ishii Shiro of Unit 731 of the Japanese Imperial Army. Although he personally oversaw wartime experimentation with biological weapons on thousands of prisoners—including American and British POW’s—Col. Ishii was rewarded for his crimes with amnesty, trips to the US and during the Korean War to South Korea, and lived the remainder of his life with honor and prosperity (as did the other members of Unit 731).¹⁰ In exchange for thousands of slides and dozens of interviews, Col. Ishii and his fellow war criminals were promised immunity in 1946 by Gen Douglas MacArthur and granted immunity from prosecution by the government in 1947.¹¹ US POW’s were compelled to sign affidavits promising to

keep secret their treatment by Col. Ishii's unit—including daily injections of germ agents. Boxes of files detailing Unit 731's activities were sent back to Japan by the US military prior to a Congressional investigation. Subsequently, in a "complete search of HQ files" an aide to MacArthur assured investigators that there was nothing in the files about Japanese biological warfare.¹² In fiscal years 1951-1953, the US spent more than \$345,000,000.00 on bio-war research, money that developed weapons used in Korea during the Korean War.¹³ Although the US government denies to this day that it used biological warfare against North Korea, a mountain of evidence weighs against the US—so much so that scientist George Wald, a Nobel prize Laureate, concluded in 1979 that the US had indeed used them.

Less than a week after the official outbreak of war in Korea, the Earl Stevenson Commission issued a report advocating biological warfare's use. During the war the US Air Force acknowledges that Unit 406 in Yokohama Japan needed 20,000 white mice per month, and that samples of plague, cholera, anthrax, typhoid and dysentery were available to them. On March 31, 1952, the International Association of Democratic Lawyers issued a report charging the US with War Crimes in Korea—including but not limited to biological warfare—and in 1953 an International Scientific Commission confirmed that biological warfare had been used.¹⁴ Moreover, chemical warfare was also employed. According to the *New York Times* of August 18, 1952, the US had used five times the amount of napalm on Korea as had been used in all of World War 2.

As early as 1950 the US threatened to use nuclear weapons against North Korea, and dams and dikes were bombs—actions that had been labeled "war crimes" in Nuremberg. The US bombed cities and killed columns of civilian refugees routinely; as in Iraq today it abused and tortured prisoners; in short it used all means possible in a vain attempt to defeat Korean people's aspirations for independence and unification—and it continues to do so. From 1976 to 1993, "Operation Team Spirit" threatened invasion and nuclear war on the DPRK. Every day US planes capable of dropping nuclear weapons approached the 38th parallel and, at the last minute, veer off. For people in the DPRK, the possibility of a US nuclear attack has thus been a daily reality for decades. In the 1980s and 1990s, North Korea reports more than 7900 provocative acts per year, and the US admits to daily high-altitude surveillance flights over North Korea. Over the years since the armistice, at least ten US planes, including an EC 121 spy plane, have been shot down by the DPRK. In March 2003, the US deployed a dozen B-52 bombers and an equal number of B-1's to the US Pacific territory of Guam, within range of the DPRK.

In South Korea, the US maintains operational control of the country's military. Under the SOFA agreement, US troops enjoy immunity from prosecution in Korean courts, leaving thousands of crimes against Koreans unprosecuted or poorly adjudicated. In 1980, the US sanctioned the use of elite troops to suppress the Gwangju People's Democratic Uprising, resulted in hundreds of deaths.

Although to most Americans, all of the above events are forgotten or at best distant history. The obscenity of murder and mayhem visited upon the world by the United States continues unabated—at the very moment when US policy-makers plan for even wider wars—in which Asia will once again be in the crosshairs of US weapons. Like a contagious disease, US military madness is now a global phenomenon, and East Asia's importance as a market for military goods has been increasing dramatically. After the end of the Cold War, US arms exports rose from \$8 billion in 1989 to \$40 billion in 1991, and "East Asia's share of global defence imports by value almost tripled, from 11.4% to 31.7%. In 1988, only 10% of US arms exports went to the region. By 1997, this had increased to 25%."¹⁵ According to

Kim Kook Hun, a Major General and director of the South Korean Defense Ministry's arms control bureau, 7 of 17 countries in the world with nuclear weapons or weapons programs were in the Asia/Pacific region, as were 16 of 28 with missile programs, 10 of 16 with chemical weapons and 8 of 13 with biological weapons.¹⁶

With the revival of Japanese militarism, annual military spending there is now second only to that of the U.S., amounting to some five trillion yen (about \$40 billion). In the name of "peace" and humanitarian aid," international deployment movement of its military (banned since 1945) has resumed, and it threatens to develop nuclear weapons.

The Imperial Crusade

The key recognition here is that expansion of the capitalist world system is the fundamental dynamic underlying the military madness and obscene wars of recent history. For two centuries, progressive thinkers and policy-makers guided by "enlightened" values have presided over the system's most successful expansion. Conventional wisdom holds that increasing core democracy should mean more enlightened policies in the Third World and improvement in the conditions of life for all human beings, but evidence abounds for just the opposite. The American and French revolutions helped propel the nascent world system centered in Europe into a framework of international domination, concentrating military power in nation-states and accumulating the world's wealth in the hands of giant corporations and banks.

The dynamic of increasing political democracy in the North coinciding with intensified exploitation in the South has a long history. French colonialists in Vietnam provided a particularly graphic example when they placed a copy of the same statue of liberty that France gave to the U.S. (the one now in New York harbor) atop the pagoda of Le Loi in Hanoi. Le Loi was the national leader who in 1418 had helped defeat the Mongols when they invaded Vietnam. Today he is still regarded as a national hero, a man whose mythology includes Hoan Kiem (Returned Sword) Lake, where the golden turtle that gave him the magical sword he used to drive the Mongols out subsequently reappeared to reclaim the sword—a story not unlike that of King Arthur in British folklore. The placing of a statue of liberty on Le Loi's pagoda certainly was an affront to the Vietnamese, one symbolizing how the spatial extension of the principles of the French Revolution can be brutally offensive to the Third World.

French colonialism was indeed brutal and deadly: Indochinese recall that dead human beings fertilize each tree in the country's vast rubber plantations. During the great war against fascism, French exploitation of Vietnam was intensified. In a famine from 1944 to 1945, at least a million and a half and possibly two million Vietnamese starved to death in the North (where the population was under 14 million), at the very time rice exports to France were fueling its liquor industry—a blatant disregard for

human life in the midst of the war against “fascism.” In American popular culture, President John Kennedy is often associated with the word “Camelot” and remembered for his beautiful wife. Tragically, it was he—one of the most “liberal” U.S. presidents in history — who ordered massive use of Agent Orange in Vietnam. Similarly, the strongest French imperial expansionists were staunch anti-clerical “progressives” who regarded themselves as ideological heirs of the French Revolution. They were “enlightened” liberals, much like John Kennedy and members of his administration were “enlightened” liberals who believed they were carrying forth in the tradition of the U.S. revolutionary heritage and Manifest Destiny.

Under the direct influence of its great revolution, France proclaimed a crusade against Algerian slavery and anarchy and, in the name of instituting orderly and civilized conditions, was able to break up Arab communal fields of villages, including lands untouched by the “barbarous” and “unenlightened” Ottoman rulers. As long as Moslem Islamic culture had prevailed, hereditary clan and family lands were inalienable, making it impossible for the land to be sold. But after fifty years of enlightened French rule, the large estates had again appeared and famine made its ugly appearance in Algeria.

In the name of civilization and liberal democracy, the British destroyed the communal ownership of village land in India, structures that had sustained local culture for centuries, a communal tradition surviving invasions by Persians, Greeks, Scythians, Afghans, Tartars, and Mongols but which could not, as Fukuyama would insist, resist the perfection of the liberal principles of the British state. Under British enlightenment, large estates developed and peasants were turned into sharecroppers. In 1867 the first fruits of British liberalism appeared: in the Orissa district of India alone, more than one million people died in a famine. Such famines were hardly indigenous to India, with its “backward” traditions (according to European values), but were brought by the “enlightened” liberalism of European democracy, through the spatial extension of the principles of “democratic” capitalism.

These references to history underscore my point that no matter who sits in the White House, the problem is not the person: it is the system. The best of modern US presidents exemplifies my point. Romanticized as Camelot, JFK’s presidency is regarded today as one of optimism and hope, of peace and prosperity. Yet it was Kennedy who initiated Agent Orange spraying in Vietnam, thereby putting himself in the same category as Saddam Hussein as heads of state who have sanctioned the use of chemical warfare. Indeed, Hussein’s Hallabja massacre pales by comparison: instead of one attack, JFK continued chemical warfare for years, killing and maiming untold thousands of people. During the Cuban missile crisis (precipitated by the US invasion at the Bay of Pigs), JFK took the world to the

brink of nuclear disaster as well. Bush's nuclear threats on North Korea's decision to develop a nuclear deterrent follow in the footsteps of JFK's bullying of Cuba. While Kennedy enforced the Monroe Doctrine in the nuclear age, Bush applies it to the whole world.

Civilization or Barbarism?

I have indicated how European capitalist "civilization"—even its most "enlightened" forms—systematically slaughtered native peoples and created a centralized world system that demands militarism as a key organizing principle. If this were simply past history, we could all breathe a sigh of relief. But these very tendencies are today stronger than ever. According to the United Nations, in the 1990s more than 100 million children under the age of five died of unnecessary causes: diarrhea, whooping cough, tetanus, pneumonia, and measles—diseases easily preventable through cheap vaccines or simply clean water. UNICEF estimates that up to 30,000 children under the age of five die of easily preventable diseases *every day* in the Third World.¹⁷ Kofi Annan declared in 2001 that as many as 24,000 people starve to death every day.¹⁸ Altogether one billion people are chronically malnourished while austerity measures imposed by the IMF have resulted in a drop in real wages in the Third World and declining gross national products in many countries. While 70 percent of the world's wealth is in the hands of 20 percent of its population, one in ten human beings suffers starvation and malnutrition.

Despite—or more accurately, because of—the spatial extension of liberal values in the period after World War II, there were four times as many deaths from wars in the forty years *after* World War II than in the forty years prior to World War II. From 1992 to 2002, the world's total income increased by an average of 2.5% per year. Yet the number of poor increased by 100 million. Of the top 100 biggest economies, 51 are corporations, not countries. The top 1% of the world has the same income as the bottom 57% and the disparity is growing.¹⁹ While the world spends something like a trillion dollars a year on its militaries, one adult in three cannot read and write, one person in four is hungry, the AIDS epidemic accelerates and we are destroying the planet's ecological capacity to sustain life. The absurdity and tragedy of such a world is made even more absurd and tragic by the profound ignorance and insensitivity of the wealthiest planetary citizens regarding the terrible plight of human beings in the periphery.

In such a world, of course, there can be no lasting peace. As long as the wretched of the earth, those at the margins of the world system, are dehumanized, branded as terrorists, and kept out of decision-making, they have no alternative but to carry out insurrection and wage war in order to find justice. In order to remedy this irrational system, a crucial task is to redefine what civilization means. We know what it is not for the billion or more "wretched of the earth" for whom increasing planetary centralization and dependence upon transnational corporations, militarized nation-states and the international axis of evil mean living hell. With the passing of time it becomes more obvious that this same "civilization"

squanders humanity's wealth, destroys traditional cultures wholesale, and plunders the planet's natural resources.

The structural violence of an economic system based upon short-term profitability is a crisis that all peace and justice movements will have to address. Even if some of the above irrationalities of the present system are reduced, the structural contradictions of the system will inevitably be displaced to other arenas. As long as vast social wealth remains dominated by the "enlightened" and "rational" principles of efficiency and profitability, there will be militarism, brutal degradation of human lives and unbridled destruction of the natural ecosystem—rather than constructive use of humanity's enormous social wealth. A few hundred multinational corporations today control this social wealth through the most undemocratic of means and for ends benefiting only a small minority. According to the logic of "enlightened" neoliberal economics, these corporations must either grow or die. Only a fundamental restructuring of the world system can lead us toward an ecologically viable life-world, one in which we decentralize and bring under self-management the vast social wealth of humanity.

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(Footnotes)

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Speech prepared for delivery at the May 18 Foundation conference on the occasion of the 24th

anniversary Gwangju People's Democratic Uprising. katsiaficag@wit.edu

¹ Depleted uranium has been used in armor-piercing projectiles because of its extreme density. The Pentagon has admitted that 320 metric tons of DU was left on the battlefields of Iraq but Russian estimates placed the amount closer to 1000 metric tons. DU has a half-life longer than the age of the solar system and has been linked to Gulf War syndrome and thousands of deaths and deformed fetuses in Iraq. A UK researcher estimated that half a million people would die from its radioactivity in Iraq before the end of the 20th

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² Hartmann, Thom, "The Genetically modified Bomb," Common Dreams News Center, September 10, 2003, <http://www.commondreams.org/views03/0910-15.htm>

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⁷ International Scientific Commission on Biological Warfare in Korea and China,

Report,

1952. Availa

ble from Koreatruthcommission@yahoo.com.

⁸ Although incredible, this number was understated by half in terms of the amount of dioxin sprayed, according to BBC

News. See

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2>

[/hi.americas/2954729.stm](http://hi.americas/2954729.stm)

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“Previous research has found that some Vietnamese have 200 times the normal level of dioxin in their bodies.”

⁹ See my edited volume,

Vietnam Documents: Vietnamese and American Views of the War

(New York: ME Sharpe, 1992) p. 146.

¹⁰ For further information on US/Japanese biological warfare see Hal Gold,

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(Tokyo: Yenbooks, 1996); Sheldon H. Harris,

Factories of Death: Japanese Biological Warfare, 1932-1945, and the American Cove

r-Up

(London: Routledge, 1994); and Stephen Endicott and Edward Hagerman,

The United States and Biological Warfare

(Bloomington: Indianan University Press, 1998).

¹¹ Harris, p. 118.

12

New York Times

, 27 December 1949, p. 16.

¹³ Endicott and Hagerman, op. cit

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¹⁴ The US tested biological warfare in the early 1960s in South Korea, Okinawa, Egypt and Liberia, using its tests to develop technical expertise subsequently utilized in South East Asia. The government also conducted tests in September 1962 at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal in Colorado. Governor John Love was denied access to the base while senior Japanese military officers were granted extensive tours.

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Tim Huxley and Susan Willett,

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Fears spread that other Asia nations will seek nuclear arms,

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¹⁷ “

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¹⁸ “

’Time to Act

’ on Hunger, Annan says,”

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¹⁹ See Arundhati Roy, “

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